

07/29/21 Thursday

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'South Park' Creators Eye Buying Up Famous Casa Bonita Restaurant Featured on Show

The iconic Mexican-themed restaurant Casa Bonita, located in Denver, Colorado, in the suburb of Lakewood, was famously featured in an episode of the cartoon show "South Park." Like many businesses, it has been closed since 2020 and has struggled financially as a result of the lockdowns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the creators of adult American animated series "South Park," are dipping their toes into the commercial real estate world and are interested in buying the famed Casa Bonita establishment, it was revealed on Wednesday.

"We want to buy Casa Bonita and treat it right. I feel like it was neglected even before the pandemic," Parker said in [an interview](#) with the Hollywood Reporter. "We are absolutely trying to buy it, we are going to do everything we can."

"We want to make it right and make it amazing," he added. Parker did admit that a possible sale is only pending due to ongoing court proceedings.

Casa Bonita is currently owned by the Utah-based Summit Family Restaurants firm. As [previously reported](#) by Sputnik, the company filed for Chapter 11 protection in Arizona on April 6.

The enormous restaurant opened in 1974, and is known for inspiring spectacle like indoor cave divers, puppet shows, magic shows, childrens' play areas, and other experiences that have made customers come back for decades.

Should the sale occur, Parker says he, Stone and several other unidentified Colorado-based restaurateurs are ambitious about their next steps for the landmark.

"We started talking about the changes we're going to make - mostly with the food," Parker said.

"We're going to make really awesome food. I was already thinking about how I was going to make Black Bart's Cave a little bigger," he added, referring to a pirate-themed attraction at the location.

"It's just sitting there. It sucks," Parker admitted. "For a moment when it was like, 'Casa Bonita is going to close down,' we said, 'We're going to go buy it.' And I felt like it was the crowning achievement of my life."

Parker had [previously told](#) the Hollywood Reporter in 2016 that he and Stone had considered buying Casa Bonita in the past. "Four years ago, it came up for sale and we had 10 minutes of like, 'We should buy it,' because they do have a few things up there now where they're like, this is the 'South Park' Casa Bonita. There are people who go to Casa Bonita because of 'South Park,'" he said at the time.

In the "South Park" episode that features the Mexican-themed eatery, the character of Eric Cartman tricks his friend Butters Stotch into believing the apocalypse has occurred in order to get a coveted spot to attend another friend's birthday party at the beloved venue. It was later

featured as part of the downloadable content for the 2017 hit video game “South Park: The Fractured but Whole.”

According to a recent [local report](#), Casa Bonita “is a few repairs and a couple inspections away from providing menu services,” and may be in a position to reopen within a matter of weeks.

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Pentagon Chief Visits Hanoi, Manila to Shore Up Defense Relations Amid Stronger Anti-China Push

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have worked for years with China to draw up a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea - a diplomatic alternative to the military solution offered by the US, which regularly sails aircraft carriers through the waterway and stages provocative incidents in China’s and Vietnam’s claimed waters there.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met with Vietnamese and Philippine officials on Thursday in an attempt to shore up support for Washington’s push to oppose Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.

In Hanoi, Lloyd met with Vietnamese Defense Minister Phan Văn Giang, Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính, and President Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, where he discussed enhancing cooperation between the two nations on defense and in several other areas, ranging from natural disaster relief and COVID-19 assistance to addressing the legacy of the war the two nations fought in the 1960s and 1970s, according to the [Associated Press](#).

According to the [South China Morning Post](#), Austin was expected to offer additional US Coast Guard ships and possibly another port visit by a US aircraft carrier “to signal closer strategic ties between the countries.”

It’s unclear what that coast guard cooperation would look like, but last weekend, the USCGC John Midgett, a 378-foot Hamilton-class cutter built in the early 1970s, arrived in Vietnam after being donated to the country’s coast guard, [according to VN Express](#). It was the second such donation, after the USCGC Morgenthau was donated in 2017.

Legacy of US’ Bloody War in Vietnam

The day prior, Austin visited Hỏa Lò Prison in Hanoi, which Americans call the “Hanoi Hilton” and held American prisoners of war, including the late US Sen. John McCain, who was a pilot in the US Navy during the conflict.

“It is a visible reminder of the cost of war, and why our strong bilateral partnership with Vietnam today is rooted in our shared sacrifice,” Austin tweeted, accompanied by several photos of the museum.

However, that sacrifice was largely one-sided: while the US lost more than 58,000 soldiers during the war, which was fought across Vietnam as well as in Laos and Cambodia, more than 2 million Vietnamese died in the same conflict. The US heavily relied on its air power during the war, waging devastating [bombing operations](#) against North Vietnamese cities and scorched

earth campaigns across the South Vietnamese countryside, where many peasants sympathized with the cause of national unity sought by the northern communist forces.

Austin pledged to redouble the US' assistance in locating Vietnam's war dead as well as the search for the remains of Americans still listed as missing in action (MIA). He also pledged to help remove landmines buried during the conflict and to help clean up the lasting contamination left behind by [Agent Orange](#), a toxic defoliant sprayed across 31,000 square kilometers of Vietnamese jungle with the intent of denying Vietnamese forces places to hide. The active chemical, dioxin, is blamed for the disabilities and illnesses of as many as [three million people](#), who have suffered birth defects and rare forms of cancer.

The US war in Vietnam ended in 1973, and two years later, the US puppet state in the country's south was destroyed and the country was reunited under the socialist state based in Hanoi. Only in 1995 did Washington and Hanoi re-establish diplomatic relations. Although both Vietnam and China are socialist and cooperate in many areas, they also have diverging national interests in some respects. Like many Southeast Asian nations, Hanoi has tried to play Beijing and Washington off one another to advance those interests.

The [US' main goal](#) in its relationship with Vietnam is, similarly, to pull the country away from China and use it to blunt Chinese foreign policy goals in the region, including its claims of sovereignty over several island chains in the South China Sea and the expansion of the Belt and Road infrastructure megaproject.

Both Vietnam and China have [fortified their positions](#) on several of the contested islands, and fishing boats and maritime exploration vessels from both nations have clashed in the contested waters, especially those looking for hydrocarbon deposits on the seafloor. However, despite the disagreements, Hanoi and Beijing have taken significant steps to address the friction themselves, recently establishing [a naval hotline](#) and conducting joint coast guard patrols.

[Austin similarly said](#) earlier this week in Singapore, where his tour of the region began, that he is "committed to pursuing a constructive, stable relationship with China, including stronger crisis communications with the People's Liberation Army."

Rehashing VFA With Manila

Austin also traveled to Manila on Thursday to meet with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr., to discuss mutual security concerns, [according to ABS-CBN](#). Unlike with Vietnam, the US has had a mutual defense treaty with the Philippines since 1951, but the Visiting Forces Agreement by which US forces are stationed in the country on rotations was recently cast into doubt after Duterte threatened to scrap it.

Philippine Defense Secretary [Delfin Lorenzana said](#) last week in a national address that the VFA would "not be changed, but there will be some addendum, side agreement to implement the VFA."

Like Vietnam, the Philippines has a two-sided relationship with China: Duterte has referred to China as "a friend," but Manila had few nice words for their northern neighbor this past spring when a Chinese fishing fleet anchored off Whitesun Reef, an island in the Spratly chain claimed by the Philippines, ostensibly to seek shelter from a storm.

Amid the feud, Chinese and Filipino diplomats [pledged to redouble](#) work on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, a document that, once drawn up, would create a legal framework in which the Philippines, Vietnam, China, and other nations could regulate their naval interactions with reference to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Enforcing UNCLOS has been the US' prime justification for a dramatic ramping up of its military presence in the waterway in recent years, where it regularly conducts war games and freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), the latter of which it uses to show contempt for China's and [Vietnam's maritime claims](#). However, the US doesn't itself recognize UNCLOS, having refused to accede to several parts of the treaty, and thus never ratified it.

"We don't believe that any one country should be able to dictate the rules or worse yet, throw them over the transom, and in this regard I'll emphasise our commitment to freedom of the seas," Austin said in Singapore. The US has claimed that the Code of Conduct negotiations are being dominated by China, and it's been suggested by some US think tank academics that Washington should even try to [sabotage the talks](#), presenting an alternative to the ASEAN nations they would then jointly impose on Beijing.

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Beijing Calls US 'Biggest Destroyer of Peace' After Seventh Taiwan Strait Transit This Year
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Like the vast majority of nations, the US has switched its recognition of the legitimate Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, but also continues to funnel military equipment to Taiwan. Staged events like Wednesday's transit of the Taiwan strait, the seventh this year, are meant to show a willingness to defend the island from Chinese attack.

After the latest transit of the Taiwan Strait by a US warship, China's Ministry of National Defense has lashed out, denouncing the action as provocative and dangerous. It comes just days after two US government aircraft landed on Taiwan, which China considers Chinese territory.

"The frequent implementation of similar provocative acts by the United States fully demonstrates that the United States is the biggest destroyer of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the biggest maker of security risks across the Taiwan Strait," Army Senior Colonel Shi Yi, spokesperson for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command, said in a Thursday statement posted on its [WeChat page](#).

Shi added the American warship, the destroyer USS Benfold, was tracked and shadowed by Chinese air and sea forces as it sailed [through the waterway](#) that separates Taiwan from mainland China. He noted troops of the Eastern Theater were "ready to respond to all threats and provocations" and would defend China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Beijing considers Taiwan a part of China and a province in rebellion, meaning its dispute with the autonomous government in Taipei is a purely internal affair. That government is all that remains of the old Republic of China, a state that existed from 1912 to 1949, when the communist Red Army was victorious and established the People's Republic of China in the national capital of Beijing.

Last year, 15 US warships crossed the strait, while the year before they did so nine times, according to data collected by Collin Koh, a research fellow from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. So far this year, seven transits have been recorded.

"The ship's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," the US Seventh Fleet said [in a statement](#) about the Benfold's actions. "The United States military flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows."

Speaking earlier this week in Singapore, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin condemned what he called "Beijing's unwillingness to resolve disputes peacefully and respect the rule of law," including "destabilizing military activity and other forms of coercion against the people of Taiwan" among a slew of other accusations.

He likely referred to the regular air drills run by the PLA Air Force in the Philippine Sea and South China Sea, which at times cross over into Taiwan's unusually large air defense identification zone (ADIZ). The region of airspace has no legal meaning, but Taiwan [regularly scrambles aircraft](#) to intercept Chinese planes and warn them away before they enter Taiwanese territory, which the Western media then reports as a Chinese incursion against Taiwan.

While Washington previously kept its support for Taiwan quiet, in recent years it has become more willing to directly flout Chinese claims of control over the island, including landing US aircraft there. Last week, a US military aircraft likely [chartered by the CIA](#) flew from the Philippines to Taiwan, and days before that, a US Air Force cargo plane made a similar trip from the US air base on Okinawa, Japan. In June, another cargo plane brought several sitting US senators to the island.

Beijing condemned these actions, which it calls "salami-slicing" because while none are cause for conflict, they add up to something greater when put together.

"Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, we solemnly urge the US side to stop playing with fire and immediately quit such hazardous provocative actions," Senior Colonel Wu Qian, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of National Defense, [said in a statement](#) at the time. "The US is now playing with fire and must stop any risky and provocative actions immediately."

Beijing fears that US actions will encourage the separatist-minded Democratic Progressive Party currently in power in Taipei to make a play for independence, and promised that if such a declaration is made, [there will be war](#).

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US Navy Charges Sailor With Setting Fire That Gutted Amphibious Assault Ship in San Diego Harbor

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After a misfired rocket set off a 1967 blaze on the carrier USS Forrestal that killed 134 sailors, the US Navy revised its firefighting practices, including wider training on how to fight fires, and changed its weapons storage procedures.

The US Navy has announced that a sailor will soon be charged with starting the fire that damaged the USS Bonhomme Richard beyond repair as it sat anchored in San Diego harbor last year. The blaze was the worst on board a naval vessel at peacetime in more than a century.

“On July 29, charges under the Uniform Code of Military Justice were brought forth against a Navy Sailor in response to evidence found during the criminal investigation into the fire started on USS Bonhomme Richard (LHD 6) on July 12, 2020,” Cmdr. Sean Robertson, a spokesperson for the US Third Fleet, told the [San Diego Union-Tribune](#).

“The sailor was a member of Bonhomme Richard’s crew at the time and is accused of starting the fire,” Robertson said. He did not give the sailor’s name.

According to the paper, a sailor was also detained by the Navy last August at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in connection with the fire, but was unclear if it was the same sailor now charged.

The fire is believed to have started in the ship’s lower decks, in a vehicle storage area used for holding ground vehicles prior to being loaded on an amphibious landing craft, but the Navy has still said very little about its genesis. It quickly spread, engulfing the ship and burning for four days before being extinguished.

No one was killed in the fire, but 63 people were injured.

According to [the Navy Times](#), temperatures inside the ship reached 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit (538 degrees Celsius). The fire extensively damaged the lower levels of the ship, its mast, command island, and flight deck. The smoldering ruin was left with buckled aluminum superstructure and listing to her starboard side, still tied up at the docks.

The fire erupted just after the Bonhomme Richard had spent two years in port receiving \$250 million in upgrades that would have allowed it to operate F-35B Joint Strike Fighters from its flight deck.

The Wasp-class warship, part aircraft carrier and part amphibious landing dock, was roughly the size of a World War II-era fleet carrier and could carry several dozen helicopters and vertical-takeoff-and-landing jets, as well as several thousand US Marines and their associated landing equipment.

In November, [the Navy decided](#) that the damage was so extensive it would cost between \$2.5 and \$3.2 billion and take between five and seven years to fully repair, so it elected to retire the 22-year-old warship and scrap it. A new warship of a similar class would cost just \$3 billion by comparison. They also considered converting the Bonhomme Richard into a hospital ship, but found it would cost \$1 billion and the same amount of time. Scrapping it, by contrast, will cost just \$30 million.

The loss has put a damper on the Pentagon’s implementation of the [“lightning carrier” concept](#), whereby its Wasp-class and America-class amphibious assault ships switched out most of their helicopters for F-35Bs and deployed effectively as additional aircraft carriers supplementing its fleet of 11 larger super carriers. Just a handful have received the special upgrades the Bonhomme Richard had, meaning the Navy is now well behind its timetable.

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After France’s Barkhane, Many Worry Deployments to Mozambique Could Make Things Worse by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Cabo Delgado is paradoxically both one of Mozambique's poorest provinces, but also one of its most resource-rich, and the explosive mix has helped drive more than one insurgent movement, including the FRELIMO liberation front that won the country's independence from Portugal in 1975.

Thousands of troops have begun pouring into Mozambique from several other African nations to help Maputo fight Islamist rebels in the country's north. However, rather than spelling the beginning of the end for Ansar as-Sunna, some experts are warning the conflict could be entering an even more dangerous phase.

South African President Cyril [Ramaphosa told parliament](#) on Wednesday that 1,495 troops were on their way to neighboring Mozambique, part of an international "standby force" organized by the 16 nations of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The SADC deployment was [authorized for three months](#) in June and will expire on October 15.

The announcement comes after several other partners also announced troops were on the way. On Tuesday, Botswana President Mokgweetsi [Masisi bade farewell](#) to the first 70 of 296 soldiers sent to Mozambique, and the [Angolan National Assembly](#) approved a small deployment of 20 military personnel to begin next month.

Zimbabwe's defense minister, Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri, [announced on Thursday](#) that 304 non-combat troops would be dispatched to Mozambique as well, to participate in training programs.

The troops will be arriving in the wake of 1,000 [Rwandan soldiers sent](#) earlier this month. The Central African nation isn't part of SADC and its deployment was arranged separately with Maputo. European Union troops are also expected to soon arrive.

Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi hailed SADC for sending aid, which he resisted seeking for months amid hesitation to welcome foreign troops onto Mozambican soil.

"The mandate of foreign forces is to help Mozambican forces restore peace and stability," [Nyusi said](#) in a Tuesday address to the nation. "We should not fear the presence of foreign forces in our country. We should be afraid of being alone in fighting terrorism."

Maputo's ability to fight the insurgency itself is severely hamstrung by the [tight financial constraints](#) placed on it by the International Monetary Fund as a condition of extending the country loans, which favor privatization and contracting deals over government programs.

The agglomeration of armies will mostly be headed to the northernmost Cabo Delgado Province, where years of mining and gas exploration projects have displaced residents and the security forces hired to guard the projects have been accused of brutalities.

Civil resistance by small armed groups began in the poor, largely-Muslim province in 2017, but has since snowballed into a powerful insurgency that has, at least formally, pledged itself to Daesh, drawing international attention. Now, more than 3,100 people have been killed and more than 800,000 people displaced as they flee from the expanding violence.

Some of Africa's largest liquid natural gas projects are located in Cabo Delgado, with investments worth tens of billions of dollars, and mines in the province are responsible for supplying most of the world's rubies. After French gas giant Total was forced to declare force majeure on its project there earlier this year, it put a global spotlight on Mozambique and demands for a military intervention grew.

However, experts are warning that flooding the area with troops could only make the situation worse.

An 'Unwinnable' War?

Jasmine Opperman, a South African-based analyst with the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), [told The Guardian](#) that she doesn't think she "can be optimistic" about the outcome if nothing is done to address the causes of the insurgency.

"If there is an over-reliance on an unaccountable military, the causes will remain," she said.

"Authorities need to reckon with what needs to be done to incentivise the militants to reconsider violence as the best means to resolve grievances," Dino Mahtani, an expert on Mozambique at the International Crisis Group, told the outlet. "If they simply think they can defeat and dismantle the group, then they may get themselves involved in an unwinnable war."

"Military pressure can degrade and erode [the insurgency in Mozambique], but ultimately this is a conflict that needs resolution dialogue," he added.

Abdullahi Boru Halakhe, an expert on governance, security and peace in Africa, gave a similar warning in a May op-ed [published by Al Jazeera](#), writing that "as seen elsewhere in Africa and in the last four years in Mozambique, militarisation does not curb violence – it brings more abuse, resentment and consequently, more violence ... Defeating Ansar al-Sunna requires not more troops and weapons, but dialogue and development. If the local authorities and their regional and international partners fail to see this, the region will see more violence, conflict, and death." Indeed, lengthy troop deployments by foreign powers, but especially Western powers, have repeatedly failed to defeat the irregular insurgent forces they are sent to destroy. Last month, France announced the end of [Operation Barkhane](#), an eight-year-long anti-terrorism campaign waged across five countries in the Sahel, and pulled some 300 troops out of the [Central African Republic](#) after that country's government turned to Russian military trainers when European Union instructors failed to have an appreciable impact on its military's fighting abilities. Last week, US Africa Command carried out two [airstrikes in Somalia](#) against al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate in rebellion against the Somali government. US troops and CIA agents have [continued to operate](#) in the country despite the formal withdrawal of all 700 US troops last year.

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'He's Awesome!': Boring Company Drivers Given Script to Recite About Elon Musk
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Boring Company was initially launched in 2016 as part of a subterranean tunnel-drilling solution to traffic congestion. Now, some five years later, the Elon Musk-headed company has finally managed to open its first fully functioning underground facility in none other than Sin City. Newly surfaced reports have detailed that the Boring Company, Elon Musk's tunneling venture, has instructed its employees to stick to the script when users of the underground transportation system inquire about the big man - Musk, of course.

Obtained by [TechCrunch](#), the "Ride Script" document provides a list of situations and potential responses that can be given to curious passengers during their ride on the Las Vegas Convention Center Loop, which runs the length of 1.7 miles and currently only includes three stops.

Although the document underscores that the sole goal of the driver is to “provide a safe ride for the passengers, not an entertaining ride,” it also acknowledges the inevitable and notes that some riders will simply want to “pepper you with questions.”

In instances where curious passengers begin to inquire about the company's billionaire founder, the script urges employees to “do your best to shut down such conversation” at first before opting to recite any of the suggested responses.

“Public fascination with our founder is inevitable and may dominate the conversation,” the document notes. “If passengers continue to force the topic, politely say, ‘I’m sorry, but I really can’t comment’ and change the subject.”

And if that still doesn’t work, fear not, there are some allowed responses.

If asked to describe how Musk is as a person, one can say: “He’s awesome! Inspiring / motivating / etc,” whereas if one inquiring mind asks about what it’s like working for the tech entrepreneur, they can go with: “Yup, he’s a great leader! He motivates us to do great work.”

In the event that an individual asks about how involved he is with the project, employees can respond by stating that “he’s very involved and supportive.” Or when Musk’s Twitter comments come up in conversation, the script suggests bobbing and weaving away, telling the passenger that “Elon is a public figure. We’re just here to provide an awesome transportation experience!” If the employee needs a quick get-away response to negative publicity that has surrounded Musk, they’re urged to respond with “I haven’t seen that article, but that hasn’t been my experience.”

However, aside from Musk-related inquiries, the script also contains possible responses about how long the addressed driver has been either working with the company or manning the system.

On the more cheery side, Boring officials offered the response: “Long enough to know these tunnels pretty well!”

“Passengers will not feel safe if they think you’ve only been driving for a week (even though that could mean hundreds of rides),” the document explains. “Accordingly, do not share how long you’ve been employed here, but instead, find a way to evade the question or shift the focus.” Also, forget about detailing any crashes that the system may have had; instead, direct the inquirer to the company.

The latest development came as the Boring Company intends to stretch its underground system to encompass much of downtown Las Vegas, an endeavor that could see as many as 40 stations along the track. In fact, earlier this month, it was announced that the firm could have new projects in [Florida](#).

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Lack of Funds Force Mexican Archaeologists to Rebury Historic 400-Year-Old Tunnel
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Archaeologists in Mexico received a full dose of shock in October 2019 in the outskirts of Mexico City after uncovering the entrance of a 17th-century tunnel adorned with a variety of

carved reliefs of animals and Aztec iconography. Now, despite excavation efforts, officials are having to rebury the historic find.

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious setbacks to life as it once was, forcing projects to go on permanent standby, and prompting the closure of some small businesses. But now, the effects of the pandemic are also forcing archaeologists in Mexico to rebury a dig site.

City officials in Mexico's Ecatepec had initially intended to turn their newly uncovered archaeological site into a tourist attraction. However, a lack of government funds has cut those dreams, and is prompting specialists to pile the dirt back onto their treasured tunnel.

The reburial was a decision made by Mexico's government-funded National Institute of Anthropology and History, with the hope that covering the 400-year-old tunnel with dirt once again would effectively preserve the site until enough funds are collected to build an on-site exhibit.

"It must be considered that the worldwide COVID-19 health emergency forced all levels of government to place priority on assigning money to health care for the population," reads a [statement](#). "For that reason, the archaeological project had to be postponed."

The agency further cited concerns regarding potential vandalism and/or looting at the archaeological site in their decision to cover the tunnel once again.

The tunnel, which stretches out over 8.4 meters and is adorned with 11 pre-Hispanic petroglyphs and stucco reliefs, serves as an entrance to a 17th-century dike system known as the Albarradon de Ecatepec.

Raúl García Chávez, who serves as the coordinator of the salvage and enhancement project for the dike system, [previously told](#) Live Science that the system lasted about 20 years before devastating floods rendered the system no longer usable in 1629.

As the water levels from the great flood did not recede for some five years, Spanish colonizers at the time chose to bury the system and order the construction of two other dike systems, according to Chávez.

However, that decision to bury the site in rocks and ash proved a safe haven for archaeologists in the present day, especially as they were able to take a glimpse of the many carvings that were along the walls of the tunnels.

Archaeologists previously indicated that the tunnel was dedicated to Tláloc, the Aztec rain god. Chávez has explained that tunnel carvings were likely etched into the walls by Indigenous laborers who lived in the pre-Hispanic towns of Ecatepec and Chiconautla.

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US Judge Dismisses One Sexual Assault Charge Against Harvey Weinstein Over Technicality by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was earlier extradited to Los Angeles, California, to face his second sexual assault trial. He was previously sentenced to 23 years in prison by a New York court in early 2020 after being found guilty of sexual assault and rape.

Convicted sex offender and disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein was granted a slight win in a Los Angeles courtroom on Thursday after the presiding judge ruled in favor of dismissing one count of sexual assault against him.

US Judge Lisa Bench sided in favor of dropping one of the 11 counts of sexual assault against Weinstein after it was determined that the case exceeded the statute of limitations. Prosecutors were subsequently informed to amend the indictment and refile the documents, which they agreed to do.

Weinstein's attorneys had also argued for the dismissal of two other charges on the same grounds, however, Bench disagreed and rejected their calls. Those charges dated back between 2004 and 2005.

Outside of the courtroom, Mark Werksman, who serves as one of Weinstein's legal representatives, specified to reporters that "count 5 is dead," according to [Variety](#). He later remarked, "we're off to a good start."

The count that was dismissed by Bench stemmed from an incident that reportedly unfolded at a Beverly Hills hotel room on May 11, 2010.

Although charges regarding the 2010 incident were initially filed within the 10-year deadline in April 2020, prosecutors indicated that the charge was null and void, since the indictment filed against Weinstein in 2021 created an entirely new case on the alleged offense.

Variety reported that when prosecutors refiled the indictment later on Thursday, they did so with an explanation on count 5 that underscored their filing supersedes the original complaint, as it cites the same argument as the paperwork previously filed in April 2020. All 11 sexual assault charges remain in the new amended filing.

If convicted on all charges, Weinstein could spend the rest of his life in prison since the maximum combined sentence would amount to over 100 years in prison. Weinstein is presently 69 years of age.

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Texas Deputy AG Apologizes for Slamming Simone Biles as 'National Embarrassment' by [Evan Craighead](#)

US gymnast Simone Biles received immense support from Americans this week after announcing she would not be competing in the Team USA final, nor the women's individual all-around gymnastics final, due to personal mental health concerns. At the same time, the 24-year-old has received backlash from many individuals who viewed her pull-out as weak. Aaron Reitz, deputy attorney general for Texas, took to Twitter on Wednesday evening to issue an apology to Biles, and recant a statement in which he panned the record-setting US gymnast as a "national embarrassment."

"In a moment of frustration and disappointment, I opined on subjects for which I am not adequately versed. That was an error. I can't imagine what Simone Biles has gone through," [Reitz claimed](#). "Simone Biles is a true patriot and one of the greatest gymnasts of our time."

"I apologize to her, and wish her well," the deputy AG concluded, emphasizing that his "personal social media comments" do not represent the views of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, nor the Office of the Attorney General.

Reitz's since-deleted tweet against Biles, who was born in Texas and still resides in the Lone Star State, quoted another post that applauded the 1996 Olympic performance of Team USA gymnast Kerri Strug. Strug, one of the US' "Magnificent Seven," severely injured her ankle during the first half of the vault competition, but refused to bow out of the event and ultimately led her team to win the US' first gold medal in women's gymnastics.

"Contrast this with our selfish, childish national embarrassment, Simone Biles," Reitz said in his quote tweet.

The deputy AG's attempt at using Strug's story to chastise Biles fell flat, as the two-time Olympian threw her support behind the 24-year-old on Tuesday.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Biles is no stranger to performing with adversity. When the US Women's Gymnastics team took home gold at the 2018 World Championships in Qatar, Biles dominated in nearly every competition, despite intense stomach pains from what was later confirmed to be a kidney stone.

Despite her pull-outs this year, Biles has continued to root for her fellow Team USA gymnasts. She also expressed in a Wednesday social media post that "the outpouring [of] love & support I've received has made me realize I'm more than my accomplishments and gymnastics which I never truly believed before."

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Biden Directs Pentagon to Establish 'How and When' to Mandate COVID-19 Vaccines for US Troops

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Presently, the US Department of Defense administers more than a dozen different vaccines to American troops, including jabs for hepatitis (A and B), measles, smallpox and influenza.

Though over 70% of US troops are fully vaccinated against COVID, US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that a federal mandate for the vaccine is "under consideration."

During a Thursday address to the public, Biden announced that the federal government would be pursuing a more targeted approach against COVID-19, as the contagious disease's Delta variant surges in the US.

The US president, in conjunction with the new vaccine push, has ordered the Pentagon "to look into how and when they will add COVID-19 vaccination to the list of required vaccinations for members of the military," according to a [White House fact sheet](#). "This is particularly important because our troops serve in places throughout the world—many where vaccination rates are low and disease is prevalent."

Pentagon officials have previously expressed that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) would have to fully approve the vaccine before the military could begin such a mandate.

As of now, the COVID-19 vaccines in circulation in the US have only received emergency use authorization from the FDA.

The administration's release applauded the Department of Veteran Affairs for becoming the US' first federal agency to take the "common-sense step" to make COVID-19 vaccines mandatory for affiliated health care providers and personnel.

"Too many veterans have already lost their lives to this virus, and veterans and their families deserve nothing less than us doing everything we can to protect their health," the White House declared.

Additionally, more than 50 public health, health care and medical groups published a joint statement on Monday urging other health industry groups to implement company-wide mandates requiring employees get fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

"Because of highly contagious variants, including the Delta variant, and significant numbers of unvaccinated people, COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths are once again rising throughout the United States," wrote the groups, which included the American Medical Association, the National Pharmaceutical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Though Biden floated "consideration" of a federal mandate for COVID-19 vaccines this week, the US president announced on Thursday that federal employees and contractors who have yet to be fully vaccinated must adhere to a number of measures. In addition to weekly - or bi-weekly - tests for COVID, unvaccinated federal workers and contractors will also have to wear masks while working and avoid traveling.

As for those not working for Washington, Biden called on state and local governments to sweeten the pot by offering individuals \$100 to get fully vaccinated. Resources for such campaigns may be derived from the American Rescue Plan, according to the US president.

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Watch: Dangerous Storms Move East, Kicking Up Tornado Warnings in Several US States
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The National Weather Service warned on Wednesday that Wisconsin and other Midwest US states could be subject to severe weather, including high, hurricane-force winds that can bring about tornadoes, and potentially a derecho - a widespread, long-lived, straight-line wind storm that is often associated with mesoscale convective systems.

Tornado reports, warnings and watches were issued in several states throughout Thursday afternoon, as powerful and potentially dangerous thunderstorms traveled from the Midwest to the East Coast of the US.

At least four tornadoes of varying strength touched down in Wisconsin, with substantial damage in the counties of Waukesha, Jefferson and Fond du Lac, according to survey crews with the NWS.

One of the most intense tornado touched down around 1:15 a.m. local time, in the vicinity of Jefferson County. The tornado, estimated to be between 86-110 miles per hour, caused damage near Concord.

Thursday's storms are associated with the same weather system that brought hail, isolated tornadoes and other dangerous conditions that prompted Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers (D) to declare a state of emergency on Thursday.

"Last night's storms affected communities from the Mississippi River to Lake Michigan, leaving many regions with widespread damage," Evers said. "I'm declaring a State of Emergency this morning to ensure state resources are available as we work together to get communities the support and help they need."

As the system traveled, at least two tornadoes popped up in Ohio's Jefferson County and Harrison County, according to the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's \(NOAA\) storm report](#).

Pennsylvania residents also spotted a number of tornadoes on Thursday, with one forming just north of Ohio.

[A tornado watch has been active](#) since this afternoon for several Mid-Atlantic states, including the cities of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Baltimore, Maryland. However, most of the Washington, DC-metropolitan area does not have an active tornado warning or watch.

Storms are expected to continue throughout Thursday night, as the cool front pushes southward, according to Accuweather.

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First Group of Afghans Who Helped US Forces Now on Their Way to US - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The first group of nearly 250 Afghans who worked for the US military and diplomatic missions in Afghanistan is now en route to the United States, Senior Deputy Homeland Security Advisor Russ Travers said at a briefing.

"I am immensely proud to announce our first group of Afghan special immigrants relocated under the operation Allies which is now on their way to America," Travers said, adding that the route and time of the transit would not be disclosed to the public.

When asked about the exact number of people on the flight, Jacobson replied that there will be "just over 200" and "less than 250 people," without going into details.

Travers recalled that the US has a long-standing tradition of welcoming refugees and others to the US.

"We, along with our civil society partners and tens of thousands of volunteers across our nation look forward to welcoming these new friends and partners to their new community to the United States," Travers said.

All the Afghan refugees have completed their "rigorous security background checks" as well as medical exams and now they are joining the some 70,000 Afghan residents who have received visas since 2008.

"Their arrival is a combination of the enormous effort across the US government," Travers said. Meanwhile, Ambassador Tracey Jacobson from State Department Afghanistan Task Force said the group of Afghan residents coming to the US have also undergone COVID-19 checks and officials have prepared vaccines for them if they need them.

"We are going to continue to relocate eligible SIV [Special Immigrant Visas applicants and their families for the gratitude of their service," she added.

Thousands of Afghans are trying to flee their country following the nearly full US troops withdrawal and the offensive of the Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia) to recapture the country. Earlier in July, US President Joe Biden announced the relocation flights from Afghanistan for interpreters and other allies will begin this month.

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RPT - Cuban American Activists Deliver State Dept. Petition to Lift US Blockade Against Havana

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Cuban American activists provided senior State Department official Emily Mendrala a petition with 27,000 signatures calling on the United States to lift the decades-long blockade against the island nation, group leader Carlos Lazo told Sputnik.

The Biden administration recently sanctioned Cuban officials over the crack down on protests, a move contrary to expectations among many that the White House might normalize relations with Havana and reverse Trump-era restrictions.

"We met with Emily Mendrala and I gave her our petition with 27,000 signatures," Lazo said on Thursday.

Mendrala, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Western Hemisphere Affairs covering Cuba, told the activists she would convey all these ideas to the White House, Lazo said.

Lazo noted that US President Joe Biden promised during his campaign last year to lift the sanctions against Cuba.

"We talked to her about the need of fulfilling this work," Lazo said.

Earlier in July, Lazo and his colleagues marched from Miami to Washington, DC to express their opposition to the blockade of Cuba.

"More than half of the Cuban Americans want engagement, stable relations and bridge of love with the Cuban people," Lazo said. "During our walk we had an opportunity to talk to Americans of all backgrounds, and no one person agreed with that blockade."

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island nation's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve at least a half dozen different American laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but the policy was reversed by the Trump administration.

Lazo said that during his stay in Washington he already met and will be meeting with a number of US lawmakers and their staff.

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RPT - New Republican Threats Unlikely to Reverse Biden Position on Nord Stream 2 - Experts

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Republican threats to block official appointments will not convince the Biden administration to impede construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, experts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, US Senate banking committee Republicans threatened to oppose the nomination of senior Treasury officials unless the Biden administration imposed sanctions related to the construction of Nord Stream 2. Last week, President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel signed a deal that requires the US to allow for the unhindered completion of Nord Stream 2 including by refraining from sanctions.

"Nord Stream 2 is a done deal," historian and political commentator Dan Lazare. "The Republicans can't [stop it]."

Besides, Lazare added, US arguments that Nord Stream 2 would make Western Europe dependent on Russia for oil never made sense.

"The Russians had never used Nord Stream 1 in order to gain leverage over European politics, so why would they use Nord Stream 2?" Lazare asked.

The fact that Nord Stream goes through international waters means that its legal position is impeccable, Lazare pointed out.

"Moreover, everyone agreed that replacing Russian natural gas with LNG [liquefied natural gas] shipped 5,000 miles from Texas was absurd - everyone, that is, except [Texas Senator] Ted Cruz's oil pals. So that argument was destined to go nowhere as well," he said.

In truth, the only reason Washington opposed the project is because it wanted Russia to continue paying transit fees to Kiev for the use of old pipelines, he added. However, Ukraine had failed to be a reliable business partner to the interested parties in the gas trade, Lazare recalled.

American University in Moscow President Edward Lozansky said German-Russian cooperation over the Nord Stream 2 project was a successful example of free market international trade that US ideologists claimed to value.

"Those who object to Biden's deal with Merkel show their lack of strategic foreign policy vision and readiness to dismiss free market rules when they do not serve their interests. Germany is

the main US ally and it really wants Nord Stream 2 since it is the best for their economy," he said.

The deal is also safe considering the US House and Senate are controlled by Democrats and they as well as the media "will not let Biden down," he added.

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner observed that the project was initiated by Germany - not Russia - because Berlin badly needed the gas once Merkel committed to shutting down nuclear.

"Washington has two interests: weakening Russia, above all; and selling more expensive US sourced LNG for economic as well as political reasons. That is why we have been hawking LNG all over the region using high pressure tactics [including] blackmail," Brenner explained.

Financial analyst and former London merchant banker Martin Hutchinson agreed that efforts to block completion of the pipeline came too little, too late.

"Could they stop it? I doubt it: The thing is nearly finished and it was probably a futile attempt anyway," Hutchinson said.

The efforts to block the pipeline were just another example of the United States "overreaching as usual," Hutchinson concluded.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Unlikely to Resist Neocon Policy Pressures on Iraq Troops Pullout

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is unlikely to resist the still dominant neoconservative influence at the Pentagon and CIA to maintain a serious military presence in Iraq, analysts told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, Biden announced that all US combat troops would leave Iraq by the end of the year. However, he also said the US military would leave behind a small non-combat force to provide training and assistance to counter the Islamic State terrorist group (outlawed in Russia).

PERVASIVE NEOCONS

When Biden came into office he surrounded himself with a cabinet and senior advisers who had supported wars and military action in Iraq and Syria, among other countries. Biden, however, as vice president opposed some of the Obama administration's aggressive policies but, apparently, his objections did not change the decisions.

"I don't see him pushing back against pervasive neoconservative Pentagon and CIA interests in maintaining more than non-combat assistance in Iraq," former USAF Lieutenant Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski, a veteran Pentagon analyst, said. "Neoconservatives in the US security bureaucracy have remained influential since George W. Bush's administration, and that influence persists under Biden."

It would also be easy for Biden to backtrack on his widely publicized and so far popular commitment to a full evacuation of US troops from Iraq after 18 years of occupation because the nature of the American military presence there had deliberately been made so opaque and blurred, Kwiatkowski pointed out.

"There is rarely a clean line between training, assisting, anti-terrorism, and actual combat. Biden can follow through on his pledge, but merge easily back into combat-style activities, especially given the Pentagon penchant for troop security and its reluctance to draw down from these long-term and heavily invested missions," she said.

The United States was certainly not pulling out of the Middle East and Biden clearly remained committed to upholding the US powerful military presence in the region, Kwiatkowski said.

"It is possible Syria and Saudi Arabia will serve as the main loci for [US] combat response in the region, and Biden will try to conduct war via air, sea and satellite - staying 'true' to his word about leaving Iraq," she said.

However, US policy bungles under Biden's predecessor President Donald Trump and his national security adviser John Bolton had already driven even the current Iraqi government much further into the arms of Iran, Kwiatkowski said.

"Iraq today is closer to Iran politically as a result of a number of missteps stemming from neoconservative John Bolton's encouragement of Trump to kill Iranian General [Qasem] Soleimani in June 2019, over six months before Trump actually approved the attack that killed the general in January 2020 as he visited Iran on a peace mission," she said.

Also, during Biden's long record of 30 years in the Senate and eight more as vice president, he had never ever stood up and opposed aggressive neocon driven policies across the Middle East, Kwiatkowski noted.

FOREVER WARS

Independent Institute Center on Peace & Liberty Director Ivan Eland said he believed Biden was sincere in wanting to end the apparently endless US military involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan. But he agreed with Kwiatkowski that the president was unlikely to withstand pressure to send troops back into them.

"Biden seems intent on getting out of US combat missions in America's two 'forever wars'...

However, the question is whether the administration will be able to withstand pressure from the US foreign policy establishment if bad developments in Afghanistan and Iraq occur, which are likely," he said.

If the Islamic State resurges in Iraq, Iranian-sponsored Shi'a militias can probably handle it, Eland noted, but the US may still feel the need to act.

"There would be some pressure for America to 'do something' and escalate involvement," he noted.

However, Biden appeared committed to getting out of Iraq if the American public does not believe the interventionist media hype over the alleged "dangers" arising in both nations and the video from them is not too graphic, Eland conceded.

"I think the public is tired of those long wars and will ultimately permit Biden to withdraw," he concluded.

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RPT - Native Americans Bring Giant Totem Pole to Washington, Urge Biden to Protect Sacred Sites

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Native American tribes from across the US brought a 25-foot totem pole to the nation's capital and urged the Biden administration to take action to protect sacred sites, Native Organizers Alliance Director Judith LeBlanc told Sputnik.

"The Red Road to DC totem journey has brought together over 17 tribal nations who have been struggling and organizing and praying since the beginning of time to protect their sacred places," LeBlanc said. "Why we brought these 17 nations together is that we need urgent action by the federal government, we need policies that - because each sacred site is very different - we need policies that will protect all of the sacred sites."

The totem pole, crafted by the Lummi Nation's House of Tears Carvers earlier this summer, will stand in front of the National Museum of the American Indian until the end of July. The President of The National Congress of American Indians, Fawn Sharp, as well as Interior Secretary Deb Haaland participated in a welcome ceremony for the totem pole.

Many Native sacred sites across the US are under threat of being destroyed by resource extraction and industrial development initiatives if the federal government does not intervene. LeBlanc said that they have collected over 75,000 signatures over the last two weeks for a petition supporting the right of Native American organizations to be at the decision-making table. "We believe that the best way to solve the problems that we face in this country and in Indian country, our territories, is... with us sitting at the decision table and we are part of decision making, not waiting for the federal government to make a decision after consulting us," she said. Each sacred site, Le Blanc added, is in a different stage of negotiations or in legal fights or are just being totally ignored.

"For each sacred site it is a separate solution," LeBlanc said. "We want an immediate action." LeBlanc added that the Biden administration has been on a "good path" when it comes to protecting the sites, although they are still encouraging them to remember their "ancestral responsibilities" to upholding the right to freedom of religion by continuing to take action to preserve them.

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RPT - Indigenous Leaders, US Interior Chief to Discuss Probe of Unmarked Graves - Representative

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Indigenous leaders will discuss the US probe into possible unmarked graves at the sites of former boarding schools for Native Americans during a meeting with Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, Native Organizers Alliance Director Judith LeBlanc told Sputnik.

The US investigation, launched by Haaland last month, was spurred by the discoveries of the remains of hundreds of Indigenous children at former forced assimilation schools across Canada.

"Absolutely," Leblanc said on Thursday, responding to a question of whether the probe will be a topic of conversation during Friday's meeting with Haaland.

Leblanc, a citizen of the Caddo Nation, whose traditional territory spans across the Southeastern United States, welcomed the Department of the Interior's (DOI) investigation. "The initiative that Secretary Haaland has taken, has given us a lot of hope that finally there will be some federal government action to reveal what the truth is and then to begin the healing process for so many families," she said.

The Indian boarding schools were established by the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 and existed through the 1960s to culturally assimilate Indigenous children of the United States by forcibly relocating them from their families and communities where their Native identities, languages, and beliefs were forcibly suppressed, Haaland said.

The meeting will come at the conclusion of the Red Road to DC, a cross country tour highlighting indigenous sacred sites at risk, by tribal leaders from across the country, which was commemorated by the presentation of a 25-foot totem pole to the nation's capital.

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Texas Governor Vows to Defy US Attorney General's Warning on Migrant Handling Restrictions

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott in a press release indicated he will defy US Attorney General Merrick Garland's warning to rescind a state order the governor issued to restrict the movement of illegal migrants.

On Wednesday, Abbott issued an order prohibiting civilians, such as contractors, from transporting illegal migrants as part of an effort to prevent migrants from spreading the novel coronavirus.

"These irresponsible policies and actions by the Biden Administration are endangering the lives of many Americans as well as the unlawful immigrants themselves," Abbott said on Thursday. "I will take every available step consistent with the law to fulfill my duty to protect the health and safety of all Texans."

Earlier on Thursday, Garland sent a letter to Abbott warning him the Justice Department will take legal action against the state if the governor's order is not rescinded immediately.

Garland argues that it would cause disruptions to the federal government's immigration functions because it uses contractors and other officials not considered law enforcement.

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Biden Nominates Prominent Cuban American to Serve as US Envoy to OAS

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has nominated Francisco Mora to serve as the US Representative to the Organization of American States (OAS), the White House said in a press release.

Selecting Mora, a prominent Cuban American with a history of advocating for human rights, for the role sends a message that the administration sees promoting democracy in Latin America as critical, according to The New York Times.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate... Francisco O. Mora, Nominee for Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the Organization of American States, with the rank of Ambassador," the release said on Thursday.

Mora is a professor at Florida International University but he previously served as the deputy assistant secretary for defense for the Western Hemisphere under the Obama administration. The Biden administration has expressed concerns over issues concerning Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba.

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Indigenous Leaders, US Interior Chief to Discuss Probe of Unmarked Graves - Representative

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The US investigation, launched by Haaland last month, was spurred by the discoveries of the remains of hundreds of Indigenous children at former forced assimilation schools across Canada.

"Absolutely," Leblanc said on Thursday, responding to a question of whether the probe will be a topic of conversation during Friday's meeting with Haaland.

Leblanc, a citizen of the Caddo Nation, whose traditional territory spans across the Southeastern United States, welcomed the Department of the Interior's (DOI) investigation.

"The initiative that Secretary Haaland has taken, has given us a lot of hope that finally there will be some federal government action to reveal what the truth is and then to begin the healing process for so many families," she said.

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NASA Says Starliner to Launch No Earlier Than August 3

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - NASA would be able to launch Starliner spacecraft to the International Space Station (ISS) no earlier than August 3, the manager of the commercial crew program, Steve Stich, told reporters.

NASA decided to postpone the launch, initially scheduled for Friday, following an incident with the new module Nauka.

"Right now the earliest opportunity would be Tuesday, August 3," Stich said on Thursday.

Earlier, Russian cosmonauts told ground specialists that Nauka's engines had unexpectedly activated which led to a change in the position of the station. The engines of the module and the Progress MS-17 cargo vehicle had to be switched on in order to compensate for the operation of the Nauka engines.

"As we look at the situation today, we decided that it would not be smart to go launch the OFT-2 [Orbital Flight Test-2] mission tomorrow. We wanted to give the ISS program a time to assess what happened today, determine the cause and make sure that they will be ready to support the Starliner launch," Stich said.

The Starliner itself and all systems are ready for launch, he added.

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US Attorney General Warns Texas Not to Interfere With Federal Immigration Tasks - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland sent a letter to Texas Governor Greg Abbott threatening to take legal action if Abbott does not rescind a state order restricting the transportation of illegal migrants.

On Wednesday, Abbott issued an order prohibiting civilians, such as contractors, from transporting illegal migrants as part of an effort to prevent migrants from spreading the novel coronavirus.

"Texas has no authority to interfere with the United States' 'broad, undoubted power over the subject of immigration' by impairing the United States' release of individuals and the ability of those individuals to comply with federal immigration law," Garland said on Thursday.

Garland said the Justice Department will pursue legal action if Abbott does not immediately rescind his order.

Although Abbott's order does not affect federal, state and local law enforcement officials, Garland argues that it would cause disruptions to the federal government's immigration functions because it uses contractors and other officials not considered law enforcement.

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Yemeni Parasitic Twin Successfully Separated at Saudi Children's Hospital in Riyadh

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia's doctors have successfully separated Yemeni parasitic twin in a surgery performed at the Specialized Children's Hospital in Riyadh, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center announced in a release.

A parasitic twin is an identical twin that has stopped developing during gestation, but is physically attached to the fully developing twin.

"Dr. Abdullah Al Rabeeah, Head of the Surgical and Multidisciplinary Team for the Saudi Conjoined Twins Program, announced today the successful separation surgery of the Yemeni parasitic twin 'Aisha Ahmad Saeed Mahamod,'" the release said on Thursday. "The surgery that took place at the King Abdullah Specialized Children's Hospital, Ministry of National Guard - Health Affairs in Riyadh, was made possible by the generosity of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud."

The Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center noted that Saudi Arabia covered all the expenses, including medical care, transportation and accommodation costs for the baby and her family. The relief center revealed citing Dr. Al Rabeeah that the complex eight-phase procedure lasted about 8.5 hours, and was carried out by 25 doctors and specialists as well as numerous technicians and nursing staff.

"Baby Aisha was sedated and necessary tubes were inserted to ensure the accurate monitoring of her condition during the surgery," the release said. "The second phase was led by the head of the pediatric urology team, Dr. Fayez Al Modhen, who performed a diagnostic endoscopy of the girl's urinary and reproductive systems. The third phase involved sterilization and preparation of the surgical sites."

The plastic surgery team headed by Dr. Obaid Al Mishail then began the fourth phase with the opening and preparation of the skin and membranes from the parasitic limbs to help cover the void after separation.

"The pediatric orthopedic team led by Dr. Ayman Al Jawadi participated in the fifth phase to separate the pelvis and parasitic limbs and modify the pelvis," the release said. "Then the pediatric urology team returned to complete the sixth phase to separate and reconstruct the urogenital system, followed by the seventh phase to examine the intestines and to create a temporary stomach; this phase was conducted by a pediatric surgery team led by Dr. Mohammed Al Namshan."

The eighth phase involved all the members of the surgical team who participated in the reconstruction and closure, the release said.

Following the surgery, baby Aisha was transferred to the hospital's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit for monitoring and follow-up, the release added.

The surgery was the 50th successful separation conducted by the surgical team as part of the Saudi Conjoined Twins Program, which has been treating these special children since 1990. A total of 117 cases have been reviewed by the team from 22 countries across three continents, according to the release.

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ANALYSIS - Biden Unlikely to Resist Neocon Policy Pressures on Iraq Troops Pullout Strategy
WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is unlikely to resist the still dominant neoconservative influence at the Pentagon and CIA to maintain a serious military presence in Iraq, analysts told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, Biden announced that all US combat troops would leave Iraq by the end of the year. However, he also said the US military would leave behind a small non-combat force to provide training and assistance to counter the Islamic State terrorist group (outlawed in Russia).

PERVASIVE NEOCONS

When Biden came into office he surrounded himself with a cabinet and senior advisers who had supported wars and military action in Iraq and Syria, among other countries. Biden, however, as vice president opposed some of the Obama administration's aggressive policies but, apparently, his objections did not change the decisions.

"I don't see him pushing back against pervasive neoconservative Pentagon and CIA interests in maintaining more than non-combat assistance in Iraq," former USAF Lieutenant Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski, a veteran Pentagon analyst, said. "Neoconservatives in the US security bureaucracy have remained influential since George W. Bush's administration, and that influence persists under Biden."

It would also be easy for Biden to backtrack on his widely publicized and so far popular commitment to a full evacuation of US troops from Iraq after 18 years of occupation because the nature of the American military presence there had deliberately been made so opaque and blurred, Kwiatkowski pointed out.

"There is rarely a clean line between training, assisting, anti-terrorism, and actual combat. Biden can follow through on his pledge, but merge easily back into combat-style activities, especially given the Pentagon penchant for troop security and its reluctance to draw down from these long-term and heavily invested missions," she said.

The United States was certainly not pulling out of the Middle East and Biden clearly remained committed to upholding the US powerful military presence in the region, Kwiatkowski said.

"It is possible Syria and Saudi Arabia will serve as the main loci for [US] combat response in the region, and Biden will try to conduct war via air, sea and satellite - staying 'true' to his word about leaving Iraq," she said.

However, US policy bungles under Biden's predecessor President Donald Trump and his national security adviser John Bolton had already driven even the current Iraqi government much further into the arms of Iran, Kwiatkowski said.

"Iraq today is closer to Iran politically as a result of a number of missteps stemming from neoconservative John Bolton's encouragement of Trump to kill Iranian General [Qasem]

Soleimani in June 2019, over six months before Trump actually approved the attack that killed the general in January 2020 as he visited Iran on a peace mission," she said.

Also, during Biden's long record of 30 years in the Senate and eight more as vice president, he had never ever stood up and opposed aggressive neocon driven policies across the Middle East, Kwiatkowski noted.

FOREVER WARS

Independent Institute Center on Peace & Liberty Director Ivan Eland said he believed Biden was sincere in wanting to end the apparently endless US military involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan. But he agreed with Kwiatkowski that the president was unlikely to withstand pressure to send troops back into them.

"Biden seems intent on getting out of US combat missions in America's two 'forever wars'...

However, the question is whether the administration will be able to withstand pressure from the US foreign policy establishment if bad developments in Afghanistan and Iraq occur, which are likely," he said.

If the Islamic State resurges in Iraq, Iranian-sponsored Shi'a militias can probably handle it, Eland noted, but the US may still feel the need to act.

"There would be some pressure for America to 'do something' and escalate involvement," he noted.

However, Biden appeared committed to getting out of Iraq if the American public does not believe the interventionist media hype over the alleged "dangers" arising in both nations and the video from them is not too graphic, Eland conceded.

"I think the public is tired of those long wars and will ultimately permit Biden to withdraw," he concluded.

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NASA Says ISS, Boeing Starliner Spacecraft Crews in No Immediate Danger After Launch Delay

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - NASA said there is no immediate danger for the crews of the International Space Station (ISS) and Boeing Starliner spacecraft are in no immediate danger after the incident with module Nauka.

"As far as the danger of the crews, there was no immediate danger at any time," ISS Program Manager Joel Montalbano told reporters on Thursday.

Earlier, Russian cosmonauts told ground specialists that Nauka's engines had unexpectedly activated. This led to a change in the position of the station, and the engines of this module and the Progress MS-17 cargo vehicle had to be switched on in order to compensate for the operation of the Nauka engines.

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Dow Jones, S&P Surge to Record Highs as Federal Reserve Stays Course With Stimulus

NEW YORK, July 29 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street mostly surged on Thursday, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the S&P 500 indexes hitting record highs a day after the Federal Reserve ruled out any immediate change to US interest rates or the stimulus it was providing the economy.

The Dow, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, closed up 154 points, or 0.4 percent, at 35,084. It earlier hit an all-time high of 35,172.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled up 19 points, or 0.4 percent, at 4,419. The S&P 500 hit its highest peak ever of 4,4230 during the session.

The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite index, which groups high-flying tech names as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, finished the session up 16 points, or 0.1%, at 14,778.

"US stocks rallied to fresh record highs and Treasuries slumped anew after a downside surprise in both GDP and jobless claims justified the Fed[ederal Reserve]'s dovish stance," Ed Moya, analyst at New York brokerage firm OANDA, said.

US Gross Domestic Product likely expanded by 6.5 percent in the second quarter, the Commerce Department said on Thursday, estimating growth at well below the 8.5 percent forecast by economists.

Jobless claims, meanwhile, stood at 400,000 and above for a second week in a row, according to Labor Department data that suggested a continued challenge for the fragile labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

On Wednesday, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said the central bank was not ready yet to raise interest rates as it was still focused on buying assets to support the recovering economy. Powell also refused to entertain any talk on when the Federal Reserve might consider tapering the \$120 billion of monthly asset purchases.

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Biden Says COVID Booster Shots Not Needed Now

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said individuals do not need to get a booster shot of the coronavirus vaccine right now but it might be needed later.

"The booster shot is not needed now, it's possible that it'll be needed later, science hasn't dictated that yet," Biden said on Thursday.

Biden said COVID-19 cases are beginning to spike in the United States and expected to climb due to the delta variant.

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Biden Says US Justice Department Made Clear Legality of Business Vaccine Mandates

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The Justice Department has made clear that businesses requiring COVID-19 vaccinations is legal, Biden said as he outlined the new federal response plan to the delta variant spike in cases.

"Every day, more businesses are implementing their own vaccine mandates, and the Justice Department has made it clear that it is legal to require COVID-19 vaccines," Biden said at a press conference on Thursday.

Biden also said he was unsure if it was legal for the federal government to mandate vaccines.

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US to Reimburse Employers for Paid Leave So Workers, Families Can Get Vaccinated - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The US government will now reimburse employers who give their workers time off to go and get themselves and their families vaccinated, President Joe Biden said during a speech about updated COVID-19 response measures.

"The federal government will now reimburse those employers to give their staff time off not only to get themselves vaccinated, but also to get their family members vaccinated," Biden said on Thursday.

Biden also announced that unvaccinated federal government workers will have to wear masks, socially distance and get tested twice-weekly for coronavirus in order to return to work in-person.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORY OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) -

SPACE STATION INCIDENT

* Russian cosmonaut Oleg Novitsky aboard the International Space Station (ISS) informed the Mission Control Center near Moscow about the unplanned activation of engines of the new module Nauka, according to the crew's negotiations broadcast by NASA.

* The engines of the Zvezda module were turned on to compensate for the disturbance from the unplanned activation of engines of the Multifunctional Laboratory Module (MLM) Nauka and the

loss of station balance, the crew negotiations told the Mission Control Center as broadcast by NASA.

* The engines of the new ISS module Nauka were switched off after an unplanned activation, according to the negotiations of the crew as broadcast by NASA.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN DISPUTE

* Russia is maintaining contacts with Yerevan and Baku to implement the trilateral agreements, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday in the wake of Armenian Acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's call to deploy Russian officers along the border with Azerbaijan.

* The Kremlin is aware of the border tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan and is communicating with both sides, Peskov said.

* Azerbaijan Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov said Baku was not interested in tensions on the border with Armenia and backed a diplomatic solution to the situation.

WILDFIRES IN TURKEY

* Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin called the forest fires in southern Turkey a national disaster; the prosecutor's office is conducting a comprehensive investigation of their causes.

* Wildfires across southern Turkey have injured over 180 people, Minister of Forestry and Agriculture Bekir Pakdemirli said.

* Authorities of Turkey's resort city of Marmaris are evacuating local residents and tourists from hotels in connection with the wildfire, NTV broadcaster reported.

AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia is deeply concerned over the latest developments in Afghanistan and is ready to work "together with partners" amid possible threats, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

* Russia is worried by the drastically changing situation in Afghanistan amid the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from that country, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

US ECONOMY

* US Gross Domestic Product expanded by 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said on Thursday in its first reading for growth in the period April-June.

* US jobless claims stood at 400,000 and above for a second week in a row, according to Labor Department data that suggested a continued challenge for the labor market recovery.

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Cuban American Activists Deliver State Dept. Petition to Lift US Blockade Against Havana

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Cuban American activists provided senior State Department official Emily Mendrala a petition with 27,000 signatures calling on the United States to lift the decades-long blockade against the island nation, group leader Carlos Lazo told Sputnik.

The Biden administration recently sanctioned Cuban officials over the crack down on protests, a move contrary to expectations among many that the White House might normalize relations with Havana and reverse Trump-era restrictions.

"We met with Emily Mendrala and I gave her our petition with 27,000 signatures," Lazo said on Thursday.

Mendrala, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Western Hemisphere Affairs covering Cuba, told the activists she would convey all these ideas to the White House, Lazo said.

Lazo noted that US President Joe Biden promised during his campaign last year to lift the sanctions against Cuba.

"We talked to her about the need of fulfilling this work," Lazo said.

Earlier in July, Lazo and his colleagues marched from Miami to Washington, DC to express their opposition to the blockade of Cuba.

"More than half of the Cuban Americans want engagement, stable relations and bridge of love with the Cuban people," Lazo said. "During our walk we had an opportunity to talk to Americans of all backgrounds, and no one person agreed with that blockade."

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island nation's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve at least a half dozen different American laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with the island, but the policy was reversed by the Trump administration.

Lazo said that during his stay in Washington he already met and will be meeting with a number of US lawmakers and their staff.

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Tikhanovskaya Says Putin Was Not Mentioned During Her Meeting With Biden

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Belarusian opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said that Russian President Vladimir Putin was not mentioned during her recent meeting with US President Joe Biden.

"We were concentrated on Belarus," Tikhanovskaya told CNN when asked whether she and Biden spoke about Putin.

Tikhanovskaya described the meeting as "warm" and said she was grateful for having a meeting with the US president because it was very important for the people of Belarus.

"It's not about promises, it's about commitment," she said, adding that the meeting was "a clear message to the Belarusian people [and] the cronies of the regime."

Tikhanovskaya met with Biden on Wednesday at the White House. During her visit to the United States, which began on July 18, Tikhanovskaya met with US State Secretary Antony Blinken, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

Belarus has experienced a political crisis after incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko secured his sixth term in office in the August 2020 election. The opposition has not recognized the results, claiming Tikhonovskaya was the real winner. The dispute resulted in protests across the country that fizzled out by February.

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US House Approves \$2.1Bln Capitol Security Bill With \$1Bln for Relocating Afghan Allies

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives on Thursday approved a \$2.1 billion emergency spending measure to enhance security at the US Capitol that includes \$1 billion for relocating Afghan interpreters and their families, just hours after the Senate passed the measure in a unanimous vote.

The House passed the legislation with a 416-11 vote, sending the bill to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

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Biden to Ask Pentagon to Plan to Make Vaccinations Mandatory for Military – White House

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden plans to direct the Department of Defense to add Covid-19 vaccine to the list of required vaccinations for those who serve in military, the White House said on Thursday.

"Today, the President [Biden] will announce that he is directing the Department of Defense to look into how and when they will add COVID-19 vaccination to the list of required vaccinations for members of the military. This is particularly important because our troops serve in places throughout the world—many where vaccination rates are low and disease is prevalent," the White House said in a release.

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Biden to Say Unvaccinated Federal Workers Must Mask Up, Take COVID Tests - White House

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce during remarks on Thursday that all unvaccinated federal employees must wear masks at work and take either weekly or twice-weekly COVID tests, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, the President will announce that to help protect workers and their communities, every federal government employee and onsite contractor will be asked to attest to their vaccination

status. Anyone who does not attest to being fully vaccinated will be required to wear a mask on the job no matter their geographic location, physically distance from all other employees and visitors, comply with a weekly or twice weekly screening testing requirement, and be subject to restrictions on official travel," the White House said.

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US Delays Boeing Starliner Launch While Space Station Works on Nauka Module - NASA

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US officials have postponed the launch of the Boeing Starliner spacecraft scheduled for Friday in order to allow the crew on the International Space Station (ISS) to work on docking the Russian Nauka cargo spaceship that arrived there on Thursday, NASA said.

"NASA and Boeing have decided to stand down from Friday's launch attempt of the agency's Orbital Flight Test-2 mission. Currently, launch teams are assessing the next available opportunity," the NASA Space Station blog site said on Thursday afternoon. "The move allows the International Space Station team time to continue working checkouts of the newly arrived Roscosmos' Nauka module and to ensure the station will be ready for Starliner's arrival."

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US to Reimburse Firms for Paid Time Off Needed for Coronavirus Jobs - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Firms with fewer than 500 employees that pay workers taking time off to get coronavirus vaccinations for themselves or family members can be reimbursed for lost wages, the US Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"Paid leave tax credits [are] available under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) for providing leave for each employee receiving the vaccine and for any time needed to recover from the vaccine," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

The offer also applies to workers who take family members to be vaccinated or need to provide care for family members recovering from a vaccination, the release said.

It is not uncommon for side effects of coronavirus vaccines to require a day or more in bed.

The initiative reflects Biden administration efforts to overcome so-called vaccine hesitancy, which has slowed the daily pace of jobs from more than 3 million last spring to about 500,000, according to US government data.

A separate Biden administration initiative would pay recipients of each new job a \$100 reward, the Treasury Department said.

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Biden Urges US States to Boost Vaccination by Paying \$100 to Newly Inoculated - Treasury
WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is calling upon state and local governments to incentivize individuals who remain unvaccinated against the novel coronavirus by paying them \$100 in a bid to boost vaccination rates, the US Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"Today, the President is calling on state, territorial, and local governments to provide \$100 payments for every newly vaccinated American, as an extra incentive to boost vaccination rates, protect communities, and save lives," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The US Treasury Department will partner with the Department of Health and Human Services to provide technical assistance to state and local governments to help them use the funds effectively in support of increased vaccination rates, the statement said.

As of Thursday, 180 million Americans aged 18 and older have been vaccinated with at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccines, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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US Senators Urge Biden to Deny Iran's Raisi Visa to Attend UN General Assembly - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - A group of six US Senators on Thursday sent a letter to President Joe Biden urging him to deny Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi a visa to prevent him from attending the UN General Assembly high-level week in New York in September.

"If the United Nations General Assembly maintains its current plans to allow some in-person attendance, the White House should deny Raisi and other Iranian leaders visas to attend," the letter said.

"Allowing Raisi to travel to the United States - to the same city where the Iranian regime just tried to kidnap a US citizen - would legitimize his repression, undermine America's moral leadership and potentially endanger our intelligence security, given the likely presence of intelligence agents in the Iranian traveling party," the letter added.

The senators, including Tom Cotton, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz, said the United States should deny Raisi a visa to travel to the United States because he is a member on the country's Death Commission that oversaw the killing of some 5,000 prisoners. The executions of prisoners allegedly occurred without a lawyer and the right to appeal.

The senators also said Raisi was directly involved in the prosecution and death sentences to peaceful protesters during the 2009 Green Revolution.

"Ebrahim Raisi's role in the Death Commissions, brutal crackdowns on Iranian protesters and his association with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps should disqualify him from receiving a visa to the United States," the letter said.

In 2020, the US government denied a visa to Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to attend a UN Security Council meeting in New York amid the escalation in bilateral relations after the United States assassinated Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani.

The 76th session of the UN General Assembly will open on September 14. The high-level General Debate week, which will see in-person participation of some world leaders, will start on September 21.

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US Charges Former Truck Maker With Misleading Investors on Social Media - Regulator

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The founder of a US manufacturing firm specializing in trucks that run on alternative fuels faces charges of enriching himself by fleecing investors with misleading reports on social media, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Thursday.

"The SEC's complaint, filed in US District Court for the Southern District of New York, alleges that [Trevor] Milton founded Nikola in 2015 with the primary goal of manufacturing trucks that run on alternative fuels with low or zero emissions, and building an alternative fuel station infrastructure to support those vehicles," an commission press release said.

Milton allegedly helped his firm, Nikola, raise more than \$1 billion in private offerings and go public with a social media campaign that either misstated or far exceeded what Nikola and its products actually did or could do, the release also said.

In the process, Milton ultimately reaped tens of millions of dollars in personal benefits as a result of his misconduct, the release added.

The complaint charges Milton with violating the anti-fraud provisions of US securities laws and also seeks to bar the firmer executive from serving as an officer or director, disgorgement and civil penalties, according to the release.

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US Awards \$250Mln in Grants to Community Centers That Treat Drug Abuse – Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Some 100 community behavioral health centers in the United States will receive grants totaling \$250 million to treat individuals with substance abuse disorder, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said on Thursday.

"The Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHC) expansion grant program increases access to and improves the quality of community mental and substance use disorder treatment services," HHS said in a press release.

CCBHCs provide person- and family-centered services, including crisis intervention services for individuals with serious mental illness or substance use disorders, children and adolescents with

serious emotional disturbances as well as individuals with co-occurring mental and drug abuse issues, the release said.

"As we continue to confront the impact of the pandemic, increased support for mental and substance use treatment can be a critical lifeline to communities across the country," Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said.

The 100 grants are funded with \$115 million in previously approved COVID-19 relief funds, an additional \$77 million from the American Rescue Plan and \$58 million in annual appropriations, the release added.

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US Senate Approves \$2.1Bln Capitol Security Bill With \$1Bln for Relocating Afghan Allies

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The Senate on Thursday approved a \$2.1 billion emergency spending bill to enhance security at the US Capitol, including \$1 billion for relocating Afghan interpreters and their families.

The Senate passed the bill with a unanimous vote.

The bill also reimburses the National Guard for the costs spent to secure the Capitol in the wake of the January 6 riot.

Earlier this week, US President Joe Biden asked Congress for \$1 billion to be allocated towards efforts to relocate Afghan nationals who assisted American forces during the war.

Relocation flights for the first group of Afghans applying for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) status are set to begin this week, the White House said earlier in the month. One known resettlement location is Fort Lee in Virginia, where the SIV applicants and their families will temporarily stay until the vetting process completes.

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US Capital to Require Masks Indoors Regardless of Vaccination Status - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The US national capital city is re-imposing its mask mandate beginning July 31 due to the new spike in COVID-19 cases, Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser told reporters on Thursday.

"Beginning this Saturday at 5:00 a.m. [EST] I will issue by Mayor's order the directive that people over the age of 2 must wear a mask indoors regardless of their vaccination status," Bowser said during A press conference.

The new daily case rate in Washington now is about 8 per 100,000, which is far lower than it was at the peak of the pandemic, but four times more than it was just recently.

DC Department of Health director LaQuandra Nesbitt mentioned an increase in a number of major metrics used by authorities in making evaluation of public health safety in the district. She also warned about the Delta variant, adding that vaccinated people can transmit it to others. "We do not want to make some assumptions that we live in a bubble, and that our residents who are traveling to other places are not exposed to the Delta variant," Nesbitt said. "We know that people who are fully vaccinated, who are exposed to the Delta variant, have the ability to spread the disease to other people."

In the meantime, Bowser said authorities do not plan on imposing additional restrictions. "We know this virus is going to be around, and we are going to still have to function in the world. Kids are going to have to go to school, people are going to have to go to work, and that is how we go into the coming weeks," the mayor said.

As of Thursday, the US has over 34.5 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 611,000 related deaths, the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center said.

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RPT - Native Americans Bring Giant Totem Pole to Washington, Urge Biden to Protect Sacred Sites

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Native American tribes from across the US brought a 25-foot totem pole to the nation's capital and urged the Biden administration to take action to protect sacred sites, Native Organizers Alliance Director Judith LeBlanc told Sputnik on Thursday. "The Red Road to DC totem journey has brought together over 17 tribal nations who have been struggling and organizing and praying since the beginning of time to protect their sacred places," LeBlanc said. "Why we brought these 17 nations together is that we need urgent action by the federal government, we need policies that - because each sacred site is very different - we need policies that will protect all of the sacred sites."

The totem pole, crafted by the Lummi Nation's House of Tears Carvers earlier this summer, will stand in front of the National Museum of the American Indian until the end of July. The President of The National Congress of American Indians, Fawn Sharp, participated in a welcome ceremony for the totem pole.

Many Native sacred sites across the US are under threat of being destroyed by resource extraction and industrial development initiatives if the federal government does not intervene. LeBlanc said that they have collected over 75,000 signatures over the last two weeks for a petition supporting the right of Native American organizations to be at the decision-making table. "We believe that the best way to solve the problems that we face in this country and in Indian country, our territories, is... with us sitting at the decision table and we are part of decision making, not waiting for the federal government to make a decision after consulting us," she said. Each sacred site, LeBlanc added, is in a different stage of negotiations or in legal fights or are just being totally ignored.

"For each sacred site it is a separate solution," LeBlanc said. "We want an immediate action."

LeBlanc added that the Biden administration has been on a "good path" when it comes to protecting the sites, although they are still encouraging them to remember their "ancestral responsibilities" to upholding the right to freedom of religion by continuing to take action to preserve them.

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The totem pole, crafted by the Lummi Nation's House of Tears Carvers earlier this summer, will stand in front of the National Museum of the American Indian until the end of July. The President of The National Congress of American Indians, Fawn Sharp, as well as Interior Secretary Deb Haaland participated in a welcome ceremony for the totem pole.

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"For each sacred site it is a separate solution," LeBlanc said. "We want an immediate action." LeBlanc added that the Biden administration has been on a "good path" when it comes to protecting the sites, although they are still encouraging them to remember their "ancestral responsibilities" to upholding the right to freedom of religion by continuing to take action to preserve them.

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Biden Job Approval Rating Holds Steady at 48%, Down From Post-Election High - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Nearly half of adults in the United States credit President Joe Biden with doing a good job in the early months of his presidency, with an approval rating of 48 percent in July matching his June tally, a Monmouth University poll revealed on Thursday. "Biden currently holds a job performance rating of 48 percent approve and 44 percent disapprove. This is similar to his 48 percent - 43 percent rating in June and down from his 54 percent - 41 percent rating in April. The president gets a positive rating from 93 percent of Democrats, 36 percent of independents, and 10 percent of Republicans," a press release explaining the poll said.

As in past job performance surveys, Congress did poorly with approval of 23 percent versus 62 percent disapproval. The July reading for Congress is in line with Monmouth polls through most of the Trump years, when approval ranged between 16 percent and 25 percent except for two months, the release said.

The percentage of Americans who say the country is headed in the right direction (38 percent) compared with the wrong track (56 percent) is also similar to June's results (37 percent to 57 percent). The right track rating declined after hitting an eight-year high of 46 percent in April, the release added.

The poll was conducted by telephone from July 21 to 26, 2021 with 804 adults in the United States and a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

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US Watchdog Warns Afghanistan Faces Existential Crisis Unless Taliban Offensive Reversed

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The Afghan government faces an existential crisis unless the military offensive by the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) is reversed, the US Defense Department said on Thursday in its quarterly report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

"The ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] has retaken some districts and the Afghan government still controls all 34 provincial capitals, including Kabul, but from public reporting, the ANDSF appeared surprised and unready, and is now on its back foot," the report said. "Civilian casualties hit a record high in May and June, according to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. The overall trend is clearly unfavorable to the Afghan government, which could face an existential crisis if it isn't addressed and reversed."

The report said the absence of a major US troop presence will be consequential and create a greater challenge for the Afghan government in light of growing insurgent pressure.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Gen. Frank McKenzie disclosed last week that the United States has increased airstrikes against the Taliban in support of Afghan forces over the last several days and is prepared to continue strikes in the coming weeks if the Taliban continues its attacks.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley said about half of the 419 district centers in Afghanistan are under Taliban control, but has not taken over any of the 34 provincial capitals in the country.

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Yellen, Iraq Finance Minister Meet to Discuss US Support for Baghdad - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Iraqi Finance Minister Ali Allawi met to discuss the United States' support for Iraq and the economic challenges the Middle Eastern country faces, the Treasury Department said on Thursday. "Secretary Yellen reaffirmed the United States' strong support for Iraq, and noted the close relationship between the US Treasury and the Iraqi Ministry of Finance," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The Treasury Department also said Allawi explained the economic challenges facing Iraq and the government's determination to address them.

Since 2014, the United States has contributed billions of dollars in humanitarian, demining and stabilization aid to conflict-affected and displaced Iraqis, including support for communities recovering from genocide.

The meeting took place on Wednesday after President Joe Biden reaffirmed earlier that US forces will end their combat mission in Iraq by the end of this year but will continue to train and advise the Iraqi military.

There are currently 2,500 US troops in Iraq assisting local forces to counter what remains of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).

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UNSC Extends CAR Arms Embargo, Panel of Experts Mandate for 1 Year - Resolution

UNITED NATIONS, July 29 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council renewed the mandates of the Central African Republic (CAR) sanctions regime and the Panel of Experts for another year by adopting a corresponding resolution on Thursday.

In the resolution - drafted by France - the UN Security Council decided to extend the arms embargo until July 31, 2022 and the mandate of the Panel of Experts until August 31, 2022. However, the resolution also eased the arms embargo, which has been imposed on CAR since 2013. From now on, the UN Security Council allows to exempt supplies to CAR security forces of "mortars with a caliber of 60 mm and ammunition specially designed for such weapons."

The CAR had seen an increase in violence since the general election in December 2020, when opponents of President Faustin Archange Touadera, who managed to stay in office for the second term, accused him of electoral fraud.

Armed clashes between government forces and rebel groups broke out throughout the country, with insurgents reportedly attacking civilians, including humanitarian employees.

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UN Welcomes Talks Between China's Yi, US Deputy Secretary Sherman - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes the talks between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and hopes that the dialogue will continue, UN associate spokesperson Eri Kaneko said on Thursday.

"We welcome any talks between the two permanent members of the Security Council," Kaneko said during a press briefing. "We here at the UN have always been calling for dialogue, and this is a prime example of dialogue, and we hope such talks can continue."

Sherman traveled to China from July 25-26 for meetings with Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi and other Chinese officials.

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Pentagon's Use of Private Security Contractors Requires Better Oversight - GAO

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense using private security contractors requires better oversight to ensure they operate within international law, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"The Department of Defense (DOD) has been unable to comprehensively identify private security contractor (PSC) contracts and personnel supporting contingency, humanitarian, peace-keeping, or other similar operations, limiting DOD's ability to readily and accurately identify the use of PSCs," the report said. "Without better identifying and tracking its PSC contracts and personnel, DOD will not be able to accurately determine its use of PSCs."

GAO's report was prompted by allegations the private security contractors have violated the Montreux Document - signed by 57 nations, including the United States, in support of oversight and accountability of such organizations.

The report issued recommendations to improve oversight, including to comprehensively determine which contracted activities fall within the definition of a private security function.

GAO also recommended developing a data source containing info about the personnel and contracts that fall within that definition, and create a senior-level Defense Department position responsible for monitoring oversight.

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US Jobless Hits 400,000 Mark Second Week in Row Amid COVID-19 Challenges - Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims stood at 400,000 and above for a second week in a row, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested a continued challenge for the labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending July 24, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 400,000," the Labor Department said in a statement. In the previous week to July 17, claims stood at 424,000.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated between 350,000 and 380,000 claims for the week ended July 24.

"The 419,000 number initially reported last week was revised higher to 424,000," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive. "The expectations (for) last week was down (to) 350,000. So (this) number is not great if it indeed is a leading indicator for the monthly employment number."

Continuing claims for the week ended July - reported with a one-week lag - was at 3.27 million versus the 3.26 million reading for the week to July 17. The modest change left the weekly unemployment rate unchanged at 2.4 percent.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policy makers.

The Labor Department said there were only 850,000 job additions for June. But as a whole, the United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus pandemic measures. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020. Data released on Thursday showed a growth of 6.5 percent for the second quarter of this year, although even that was way below economists' estimates for an 8.5 percent expansion.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021. But Chairman Jerome Powell says he does not expect "full employment" - defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4 percent or lower - to occur anytime soon. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.9 percent in June.

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Over 92,000 Americans Experience Power Outages After Severe Storms Hit US - Tracker

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Severe storms complete with gusty winds caused significant power outages in several US states, the poweroutage.us tracker revealed on Thursday.

As of midday Thursday, more than 92,000 customers have experienced issues with obtaining electricity, while in the morning that number exceeded 120,000.

The state of Wisconsin, where almost 55,000 people still do not have electricity, faced the most severe consequences of the storm.

Nearly 30,000 residents of the states of Michigan and Illinois have experienced outages while the state of Virginia reported almost 8,000 customers do not have electricity.

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UNSC Renews Mandate of Peacekeeping Mission in Cyprus Until January 2022 - Resolution

UNITED NATIONS, July 29 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Thursday unanimously adopted a resolution renewing the mandate of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) for another six months.

In the resolution submitted by the United Kingdom, the Security Council "expresses its full support for UNFICYP, and decides to extend its mandate for a further period ending on January 31, 2022."

The resolution also reiterates the July 20 Security Council's condemnation of the Turkish and Turkish Cypriot leaders' announcement to reopen a section of Varosha.

In July, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is backed by Ankara, unilaterally demilitarized the UN-protected quarter of Varosha. Immediately after, the UN Security Council condemned the move saying it violated all previous United Nations resolutions on Cyprus.

Varosha - a demilitarized buffer zone that separates the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities on the island - has been closed to the public and deserted since the 1974 war.

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US Launches New Task Force to Address Threats Toward Election Workers - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department said on Thursday that it has launched a new Task Force to focus on combating threats of violence against election workers and other officials involved in the electoral process.

"To protect the electoral process for all voters, we must identify threats against those responsible for administering elections, whether federal, state, or local," Deputy US Attorney General Lisa Monaco said. "We will promptly and vigorously prosecute offenders to protect the rights of American voters, to punish those who engage in this criminal behavior, and to send the unmistakable message that such conduct will not be tolerated."

The task force, launched in response to a rise in threats against election workers, will be led by Monaco and will include representatives from the Justice Department's Criminal, Civil Rights, and National Security Divisions as well as the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.

The Task Force will be responsible for receiving and assessing tips and reports of threats and violence against election workers, as well as supporting the US Attorneys' Offices and the FBI to investigate and prosecute cases.

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Biden Asks Congress to Extend Moratorium on Evictions - White House

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has asked Congress to extend the moratorium on evictions that was put in place due to the coronavirus outbreak, saying many renters still faced financial difficulties and those driven from their homes could face heightened risk from infection, the White House said on Thursday.

"The President calls on Congress to extend the eviction moratorium to protect such vulnerable renters and their families without delay," the White House said in a statement.

However, the White House did not say what was the length of the extension Biden sought regarding the original moratorium that expires on July 31.

Biden had asked the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Agriculture and Veterans Affairs to extend their respective eviction moratoria through the end of September, the statement said, indicating that Congress would probably give a minimum extension of two months.

The three departments have been central in federal efforts to protect American homeowners and renters who had fallen into hard times due to the pandemic and unable to service their monthly rent and mortgages.

The White House noted that for nearly 11 months, the eviction moratorium issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), had served as a critical backstop to prevent hard-pressed renters and their families who lost jobs or income due to the measures implemented to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

However, the CDC is unable to extend this privilege without Congressional approval due to a Supreme Court order, the statement said.

"Given the recent spread of the Delta variant, including among those Americans both most likely to face evictions and lacking vaccinations, President Biden would have strongly supported a decision by the CDC to further extend this eviction moratorium to protect renters at this moment of heightened vulnerability," it added.

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NASA Congratulates 'Russian Partners' on Docking Nauka Module to ISS - Executive

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) expressed congratulations to Roscosmos, the Russian federal space agency, on the successful docking of its unmanned Nauka module with the International Space Station (ISS), NASA Associate Administrator Bob Cabana said on Thursday.

"I'd like to congratulate our Russian partner for a successful docking of their module this morning," Cabana told a press conference at Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

The Nauka cargo module successfully docked with the ISS earlier on Thursday morning.

"Congratulations [to] our Russian partners Roscosmos on the successful docking of their Nauka module to the Space Station, paving the way for the arrival of Starliner," Cabana added in a Twitter message.

Cabana was speaking the day before Boeing's Starliner was due to take off on its first unmanned mission to dock with the ISS, a task that Cabana described in the press conference as of "critical importance" to advance the Starliner program.

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US Plans Investment in Faster Trains as Part of Infrastructure Bill - Buttigieg

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The US government will allocate funds to modernize the country's rail network as part of the infrastructure bill currently making its way through Congress, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said during an interview on Thursday.

Buttigieg was asked to confirm the veracity of reports that Amtrak's Acela route - its high-speed rail service along the US northeastern coast between Boston and Washington - would be doubling in speed as a result of investment from the infrastructure bill. He initially responded that it "doesn't quite work that way," but then confirmed that it is a part of the infrastructure plan.

"No, we are [going to put money into making our trains faster]. It's just not gonna come overnight and it's not gonna be as dramatic as that. But, no, it's unquestionably gonna give us a stronger train network on the Northeast Corridor," Buttigieg said.

The Transportation Secretary added, however, that the investment will extend beyond the US northeastern corridor and that places such as Texas and states in the Midwest would also benefit from more frequent and reliable high-speed rail systems.

When asked about the profitability of rail services in those areas, Buttigieg replied that they are not intended to make a profit, but that part of the US federal government's job is to "make an economy possible" by supporting infrastructure that may not be profitable such as roads and trains.

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Canada Central Banker Says Committed to Keep Inflation Low, Warns Recovery Could Take Time

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem said on Thursday the country's central bank remains committed to keeping inflation low but warned the post-pandemic recovery could take time.

"Bank of Canada remains firmly committed to keeping inflation low, stable and predictable," Macklem said in an op-ed published in the National Post, adding that Canadians can be confident the central bank will keep the cost of living at a manageable level.

Macklem, however, acknowledged that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has remained above its 3 percent target for three straight months - Statistics Canada reported on Wednesday that the country's annual inflation rate slowed to 3.1 percent in June - and warned that the post-pandemic recovery could take time.

Canada's inflation rate is expected to dip to its target rate of 2 percent in the second half of 2022, Macklem said, although according to the Bank of Canada's latest monetary report this target will not be sustainably achieved until 2024.

Macklem also said interest rates will remain low to give the economy the best chance to recover and keep inflation close to Bank of Canada targets in the long-term.

Soaring prices on many essential goods and services have become a hot-button issue in Canada. More than 90 percent of Canadians say they have noticed prices going up at the grocery store and at the pump, with respondents being in near-unanimous agreement that buying a home or embarking on a major home improvement project has become more expensive, according to a poll published last month.

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US Dollar to Remain World Reserve Currency in Next 10 Years - IMF Chief

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The US dollar will remain the world reserve currency during the next decade, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"The US dollar will be the world's reserve currency in ten years," Georgieva said during a conversation on digital currencies.

Speaking on the reasons why the US dollar will retain its dominant position, Georgieva pointed out to the strength of the economy, capital markets debt and the innovation capability of US companies.

However, Georgieva did not rule out fiat and digital currencies "neighboring" each other in the near future.

"Let see what we will have in our wallet in ten years. It is very likely it might be both," she said.

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IMF Engages With El Salvador, Views Decision on Bitcoin as 'Not Advisable' - Georgieva

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) considers El Salvador's decision to embrace Bitcoin as legal tender as "not advisable" but continues consultations with the authorities, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"We have been engaged with El Salvador," Georgieva said during a virtual conversation on cryptocurrencies.

On June 8, the country's parliament adopted a law that accepts Bitcoin as legal tender just days after President Nayib Bukele announced his intention to officially introduce the use of the cryptocurrency. The legislation will grant Bitcoin "liberating power," unlimited in any transaction, and to any title that public or private natural or legal persons require carrying out.

The El Salvador authorities have said they aim to facilitate the financial inclusion of all residents and promote economic growth. In addition, Bukele said the state is obligated to provide alternatives to allow residents to carry out transactions in Bitcoin and have automatic and instant convertibility into US dollars.

Georgieva acknowledged that El Salvador made a sovereign decision, but expressed serious concerns about it and said the IMF shared its position with country's authorities.

"There is a combination of concerns that - from our perspective - makes this decision not advisable," she said.

Georgieva advised El Salvador to wait and see how the situation develops in the future.

"Unfortunately, there are no easy mitigation strategies for these risks," she said.

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Americans' Satisfaction With Treatment of Ethnic Asians Plunges During Pandemic – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - Approval of US society's treatment of Asians fell to a record low amid series of violent, pandemic-related attacks on Asian-Americans in recent months, a new Gallup poll revealed on Thursday.

"Currently, 46 percent are very or somewhat satisfied, a record low and down from 60 percent in 2020," Gallup said in a press release explaining the poll.

The Gallup survey conducted June 1-July 5, followed a year in which violence against Asian Americans spiked in several major cities, the release said.

US media reports typically cite anger directed at China, where pandemic began, as a cause of the attacks. However, Gallup noted a longer term deterioration in views toward ethnic Asians before novel coronavirus emerged.

The 14-percentage-point drop in the past year followed a 15-point decline in satisfaction with the treatment of Asians between 2016 and 2020, the release said.

Before 2016, Gallup typically found more than seven in 10 Americans satisfied with the way society treated Asian people in a polling series going back to 2001.

The poll also showed that 33 percent of Americans who are satisfied with US society's treatment of immigrants, the lowest recorded by Gallup during the past 2 decades.

However, the release noted that satisfaction with immigrants had steadily declined during the previous two decades.

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Polyanskiy Says Tikhanovskaya's Remarks After Meeting With Biden Call for Regime Change

UNITED NATIONS, July 29 (Sputnik) - Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday Belarusian opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's remarks following her meeting with US President Joe Biden appealed for a regime change in Belarus.

"Speaking about the support of American government, she says 'in case that some country will make use of the weakness of the regime, the United States will be on our side.' It is a quote from Mrs. Tikhanovskaya," Polyanskiy said.

"This is, of course, a clear appeal to regime change, a clear appeal to interference into internal affairs of a sovereign state. I don't know who is advising Mrs. Tikhanovskaya, but I think she made it absolutely clear for whom she works," he said.

Tikhanovskaya met with Biden on Wednesday at the White House. During her visit to the United States, which began on July 18, Tikhanovskaya has already met US State Secretary Antony Blinken, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

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US GDP Up By 6.5% in Second Quarter of 2021 - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product expanded by 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said on Thursday in its first reading for April-June growth amid the ongoing recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, reflecting the continued economic recovery, reopening of establishments, and continued government response related to the COVID-19 pandemic," the Commerce Department said in a statement.

That rate of growth was slightly better than the 6.3 percent gain in the first quarter, which was revised slightly from the previous published figure of 6.4 percent, but still fell well below expectations.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a second quarter growth of 8.5 percent on the average.

"This is a miss," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "Companies are running lean because of supply chain bottlenecks. Meanwhile, the performance from the consumer was solid but perhaps not as strong as the market hoped, given the potential for a reopening boom." US consumer confidence increased for a fifth straight month in June to return to levels seen before the coronavirus outbreak 16 months ago, the Conference Board said earlier this week.

The Commerce Department said growth in the second quarter was helped by federal loans to businesses and grants to state and local governments. But social benefits to households, such as the direct economic impact payments, declined, it added.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent GDP growth for all of 2021, although it says it does not expect "full employment" - defined by an unemployment rate of 4 percent or lower - before 2023. The unemployment rate stood at 5.9 percent at the end of June.

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Russia 'Very Worried' By Changing Situation in Afghanistan Amid US Pullout - Polyanskiy

UNITED NATIONS, July 29 (Sputnik) - Russia is worried by the drastically changing situation in Afghanistan amid the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from that country, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"We are very much worried by the situation in Afghanistan. We see that it is changing drastically with the withdrawal of American and NATO troops," Polyanskiy said during a press conference.

"We are very much worried of the implications of potential instability in Afghanistan to Central Asia, to our neighbors, which directly affects Russia."